Mr. Holland's War

In 1862, as Federal forces moved deeper and deeper into Tennessee, African Americans, most of them former slaves, flocked to the Union Army for protection. Men, women, and children, often with no more than the ragged clothes on their backs, trailed after the long lines of blue coated marching men because they offered the assurance of safety and carried the whisper of possible freedom in their haversacks. Called contrabands (the term was coined by Union General Benjamin Butler), the men worked as scouts, spies, stevedores, foragers, general laborers, field hands, blacksmiths, and teamsters; the women as nurses, laundresses, cooks and servants.

But black men could not be soldiers. Not, that is, until August 1862, when the War Department, in a radical shift of policy, officially sanctioned the recruitment of blacks, stating "All slaves admitted into military service, together with their wives and children, were forever free." General Ulysses S. Grant, then in Corinth, MS, promptly issued an order to his commanders to use the services of all fugitive slaves behind his lines.

Then, on May 22, 1863, with the butcher's bill of Antietum, Stones River, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville requiring payment in the form of new recruits for the badly mauled Union ranks, the War Department issued General Order 143 establishing a Bureau of Colored Troops. Now Union military commanders in the South could organize and muster into service able-bodied black men within their jurisdictions to form regiments of U.S. Colored Troops.

In Tennessee, more than 20,000 black men made their mark and were mustered into service. William Holland was one of them. While the historical record for any individual black soldier, especially former slaves who could neither read nor write, is slim, military pay and pension records at the National Archives in Washington, DC, offer a glimpse into the lives of thousands of men overlooked by the history books. Even with the inconsistencies and gaps so common in these official documents, a rough chronology of their service can be established. And the affidavits required for a soldier's pension often included a wealth of personal information about their lives both before and after their military service.

Examining William Holland's record reveals that, for the most part, his war was very much like that of thousands of other "colored troops," especially those serving in the Western theater of operations. Garrison duty, guarding rail, river, and road supply routes, and escorting prisoners of war to camps in the North.

But for three months in 1864, William Holland experienced the war in a way few, if any, black men could have. For those three months, William Holland was a prisoner of the most brilliant cavalry commander who ever sat a saddle. From Sept. 25 to around Christmas Day, 1864, William Holland reluctantly rode with the man General William T. Sherman said was worth 10,000 troopers to capture, the Confederacy's most notorious raider, Nathan Bedford Forrest.

What tangled web of historical circumstance brought the former field hand and the millionaire slave trader and plantation owner together? What did William Holland think about

campaigning with cavalrymen rumored to have massacred black soldiers at Fort Pillow the previous April? And how did William Holland live to tell the tale? We can answer some of these questions, make educated guesses about others, and reluctantly conclude that many others must remain unanswered, forever lost in the loamy soil of middle Tennessee.

William Holland's story begins, if the pension affidavit he gave as an elderly man is accurate, with his birth on Aug. 31, 1831 in Haydensville, Todd County, KY., the same county that gave birth to Jefferson Davis 23 years earlier. By the time the Union armies rolled into middle Tennessee, Holland was working as a farm laborer on land owned by Benjamin Harlan near the town of Cowan. Harlan probably had a small farm and owned only a few slaves. Holland says that his proper name was Harlan, too, but he was called Holland in the army. He doesn't explain why.

With many slave owners serving in the Confederate Army, blacks abandoned the land and followed the progress of the Union Army of the Cumberland as it moved eastward across the state. When the battle at Stones River ended on Jan. 2, 1863, thousands of contrabands were put to work building Fortress Rosecrans, a 200-acre supply depot just outside Murfreesboro. Maybe William Holland worked on Fortress Rosecrans, the largest earthen fortification built during the Civil War, but the record of Holland's life is silent on this.

The record picks up when he enlists on March 1, 1864 in Pulaski, TN. Holland gives no reason, but money and clothing may have been big incentives. Black soldiers were given a uniform and received the same pay and rations as their white counterparts. Whatever the reason, Holland, standing 5-foot 3 and weighing about 140 pounds, was mustered into the 3rd Alabama Infantry AD (African descent) at Sulphur Branch Trestle, AL late in the month. He was promoted to sergeant in Company I by order of Colonel J.A. Dewey on April 15 and his unit was reorganized and renamed the 111th regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry on June 25, 1864.

According to records preserved in the War of the Rebellion, the 111th regiment had garrison duty in Pulaski, TN until September 1864 when it was sent into northern Alabama. Most of the regiment was garrisoned at Athens, but a detachment, including Holland's Company I, was sent to the blockhouse guarding Sulphur Branch Trestle, a strategic trestle bridge across Sulphur Branch Creek on the vital Alabama and Tennessee Railroad. The railway was a critical link in the long Union communication and supply chain that extended from Louisville, to Nashville, through northern Alabama and western Georgia, and finally into the ranks of Sherman's relentless "bummers" on their way to the sea.

Overextended and vulnerable supply lines were like blood in the water for Forrest's marauders. A directive from Jefferson Davis himself, issued through his brother-in-law, General Richard Taylor, authorized Forrest, 4,500 troopers, and eight pieces of artillery to raise havoc with Sherman's communication and supply lines north of the Tennessee River. They hoped the threat of Forrest on the rampage would draw off enough Union forces to relieve pressure on General John Bell Hood's army, then located west of Atlanta. On Sept. 16, 1864, Forrest's lean and mean columns set out from just south of Tupelo, MS to make life behind Sherman's lines as uncomfortable as possible. This raid, which lasted about three weeks, would bring Forrest and William Holland together.

Forrest headed for Athens, AL because it was the closest town situated on the strategic rail line. Well fortified with blockhouses and 1,350 feet of 17 foot-high earthen works, Athens was considered the strongest fortification between Nashville and Decatur. It had ample ammunition and provisions to withstand a siege of at least 10 days. Its defenders numbered both white and "colored" troops.

On the morning of Sept 24, Forrest's artillery commander, Captain John W. Morton, lobbed shells into the fortifications for about an hour, but with little effect. Rather than storm the defenses, Forrest resorted to guile and took advantage of his reputation for ruthlessness. He sent a note to the Union commander, Colonel Wallace Campbell. It read:

> Colonel — I desire an interview with you outside of the fort, at any place you may designate…My only object is to stop the effusion of blood that must follow the storming of the place

At the meeting, Forrest continued the bluff. He assured Campbell, who commanded the 110th U.S. Colored Infantry and Colonel Dewey of the 111th, that he had sufficient force and if compelled to storm the garrison, it could result in a massacre. He also invited a Union officer to review his forces, which Forrest claimed to number about 12,000. Using a trick he had employed in capturing the town of Streight, GA in 1863, Forrest paraded his men, first on foot and then on horseback, around and around in front of an increasingly nervous Federal officer sent by Campbell to evaluate the danger to the Union position.

The ruse worked. Campbell tried to delay the inevitable, expecting reinforcements to come to his rescue. In fact, a detachment of the 18th Michigan and the 102nd Ohio was on the way by rail from Decatur but they were delayed in a sharp skirmish with some of Forrest's troops under General Abraham Buford. Around 11 a.m., Campbell surrendered the town, its stores, and 600 men, essentially without a fight. Later, almost every officer at Athens signed a statement saying "that the surrender was uncalled for by the circumstances, was against our wishes, and ought not to have been made."

Forrest and his victorious troopers spent the rest of the day tearing up track, cutting telegraph lines, destroying two more blockhouses and finding others abandoned. By nightfall, Forrest had bagged about 1,300 prisoners, 300 horses, copious quantities of food, ammunition and medical supplies, and two locomotives. He lavished food and ammunition on his battle weary men, provided horses for troopers without them, and burned what he couldn't carry or send back to Confederate lines. The Union officers were paroled on their honor, the white soldiers sent south to prison camp (probably Andersonville), and the black soldiers sent to Mobile to work on the harbor defenses. In fact, General Dabney Maury commanding Confederate forces there, published a list of the black prisoners in the *Mobile Register* so that their "owners" could claim payment for their labors.

The next morning, about 10 miles north of Athens, near the town of Elkmont, Forrest reached Sulphur Branch Creek. The trestle spanning the water was 72 feet high, 300 feet long. Being the largest railroad bridge in the state, it had defenses to match its imposing size. Double-casemated blockhouses with 40-inch thick walls guarded each end and a large fortress-stockade

held a garrison of 1,000 men and two pieces of artillery. About 200 were part of the 9th Indiana Cavalry, 300 more from the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry. The rest were men from the 111th U.S. Colored Infantry, including Company I, and Sergeant William Holland.

Forrest didn't bother with his "surrender or be massacred" tactic because the fort's commander, Colonel W.H. Lathrop was made of sterner stuff than the overly cautious Campbell. Still reluctant to storm well constructed earthworks, Forrest instead eyed the surrounding terrain and ordered his two long range Parrott guns to a hill which would enable him to command the most important part of the Federal defenses. With his untrained but unfailing sense of strategic advantage, Forrest placed rest of his artillery so it could rain down the maximum amount of damage to the interior of the fort.

A furious two-hour bombardment ensued. Enriched with ammunition captured at Athens, Forrest's keen-eyed gunners poured in 800 rounds that left the fort's interior "perforated with shell, and the dead lying thick along the works." Colonel Lathrop was killed early in the fusillade and his second-in-command, Colonel J.B. Minnis, was severely wounded. With his troopers now within rifle range, Forrest demand surrender and it was reluctantly accepted.

The booty this time consisted of 300 horses, two pieces of artillery, more food and ammunition, and 973 bluecoats. With miles of railroad yet to destroy, Forrest again paroled the officers, marched his prisoners south, and sent the black soldiers to Mobile. All of them, that is, except William Holland.

Again, according to the affidavit he swore to Dec. 1, 1899, (he would have been 68 at the time if his birth date is correct), Holland says he became a "waitman" for Forrest's regimental surgeon, Dr. J.B. Cowan. Holland's pay and ration cards list him as "not present, prisoner-of-war" beginning on Sept. 25. But these papers also declare that Holland was at Mobile with the rest of the 111th.

Dr. James Benjamin Cowan was, indeed, Forrest's regimental surgeon. He was born Sept. 10, 1831 in Fayetteville, TN and received his MD from the University of the City of New York Medical Department in 1855. When the war broke out, Cowan was commissioned a 1st Lieutenant in the 9th Mississippi Infantry and soon became chief surgeon for General James R. Chalmers. He joined Forrest in July 1862. As the trestle and blockhouses burned, Holland's comrades headed south to Mobile. But William Holland and Forrests's marauding legions continued north, headed for middle Tennessee.

By now, Forrest had become a general pain Sherman's rear. To combat the menace, the angry Union commander ordered more than 30,000 Federal troops under General George H. Thomas to converge on him from various points of the compass with orders that "the whole resources" of the region be "turned against Forrest…until he is disposed of." General Lovell Rousseau, moving down from Nashville to meet the threat, wired Sherman from Pulaski, TN

> This is much more than a raid; I regard it as a formidable invasion, the object of which is to destroy our lines, and he will surely do it unless met by a large cavalry force, and killed, captured, or routed.

But Forrest was a hard man to kill, capture, or rout. He returned to Florence, AL on Oct. 5, after three weeks on the rampage, with the loss of only 47 men killed and 293 wounded. While the raid failed to slow Sherman's relentless bummers, it did disrupt his supply arrangements. It would take Union work crews six weeks of hard labor to rebuild the crippled Tennessee and Alabama Railroad. Exasperated, Sherman wired Grant on Oct. 9 that it would be "a physical impossibility to protect the roads, now that Hood, Forrest, Wheeler, and the whole batch of devils are turned loose without home or habitation."

We don't know how William Holland fared with those devils because his service record doesn't pick up again until just after Christmas, 1864. By then, Forrest had completed his famous Johnsonville Raid in early November, in which he burned the town, its warehouses bulging with supplies destined for Sherman, and numerous barges, steamers and gunboats anchored in the Tennessee River. Union losses were estimated at more than $6 million. The raid cost Forrest two killed and nine wounded. But Forrest's free booting days were numbered, and so were William Holland's days of captivity.

Soon after his Johnsonville triumph, Forrest received orders to find General John Bell Hood, then near Tuscumbia in northwest Alabama, and support his attempt to halt Sherman's devastation of north Georgia by attacking his supply center at Nashville. In one of the most ill conceived campaigns of the war, Hood wrecked his under manned army at the battles of Franklin and Nashville, suffering 12,000 casualties in just over two weeks in early December.

It fell to Forrest to cover the Confederate's headlong retreat. And he did so with his usual combination of bravery and guile. Fighting a splendid rearguard action through the sleet and rain of an early and unusually bitter Tennessee winter, Forrest's troopers found themselves eight miles north of Pulalski, TN on Christmas Eve, the same town in which William Holland had enlisted nine months earlier. Dogged by cavalry under General James H. Wilson, Forrest fended off an attack early Christmas morning by units of the 5th Iowa, 7th Ohio, and 16th Illinois. The fighting along Richland Creek, just south of the town, was at times hand to hand. It may well have been during such a fire fight that William Holland simply walked away from his captors.

We don't know what happened for certain, since Holland's affidavit says only that he did not rejoin his regiment "until after Hood's raid." We do know that his service record lists him as present for Jan-Feb.1865, temporarily assigned to Company C. The 111th had garrison duty at Pulaski after Forrest moved on, destroying what stores he could not carry. The general and his saddle weary troopers crossed the Tennessee River on Dec. 27, still keeping the pursuing Federals from annihilating the pitiful remnants of Hood's army.

With his Confederate odyssey at an end, William Holland served out the war guarding bridges on the Nashville and Northwestern Railroad. He was honorably discharged and mustered out on April 30, 1866 at Nashville. His fighting days were over, but Holland's life

continued to be inextricably linked to the killing fields of middle Tennessee, particularly Stones River, for the rest of his days.

On July 17, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation that authorized the purchase of "cemetery grounds" to be used as national cemeteries "for soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country." On June 23, 1865, General George H. Thomas, the blue Virginian against whose stalwart ranks Hood had shattered his army, instructed Chaplain William Earnshaw, superintendent of the newly created Stones River National Cemetery, "to take charge of the work of disinterring and re interring remains in the national cemetery." More than 6,100 Union soldiers killed in Tennessee are buried on 20 acres at Stones River, 2,562 of them known but to God.

Among the laborers performing this grisly but honorable task were men from the 111th regiment, including William Holland. In fact, Holland stayed on at Stones River, working as a caretaker from the time of his discharge until April 1884 when he was thrown from a wagon and dragged by a mule while working at the cemetery. Injuring his hip, arm, and hand, Holland couldn't continue to perform heavy manual labor. He applied for a disability pension in 1890 but was turned down. In 1895, he was approved for "senile disability" and received $12 per month until March 1907 when it was increased to $20 per month.

While employed at the national cemetery, Holland married twice. His first wife, Liza Love, died in 1868 near Nashville. His second wife, Ruth Miller, bore him two children, Josephine in 1872 and William in 1874. Holland probably saved some of his army pay and added to whatever he earned as a caretaker, it was enough for him to buy about three acres just down the road from the cemetery. The former slave now farmed his own land. This particular plot of good black Tennessee earth was saturated by the blood of hundreds of boys in blue and butternut who died fighting there in an area called the Round Forrest on Dec. 31, 1862, the first day of the battle of Stones River. Many of them were probably the same boys William Holland helped to bury just a few hundred yards away.

While many of the facts of William Holland's life are shrouded in mystery, the date of his death is not. He died at his residence on Aug. 14, 1909, less than a month after the death of Dr. Cowan at nearby Tullahoma. Although eligible to be buried at the national cemetery at which he worked for so many years, Holland opted to be interred on his own property and his grave lies just outside the stone wall surrounding the Hazen Brigade Monument, itself a memorial and graveyard for 55 Union troopers. The Holland property was purchased by the National Park Service in XXXX and incorporated into the Stones River National Battlefield. But the ground in which William Holland rests is forever his and his alone.